Organizational Change Resistance:
A Review of Employees' Reactions in Rabigh Refinery in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Generally, organization experiences stress and difficulties in dealing with change. However, introducing and coping with change is inevitable in today's global competition. Any organizational change may encounter many difficulties and challenges, especially when the change is actually executed. One of the challenges is due to employees' resistance. Some of the resistance are logical and supported with rational reasons, but in some other cases the change is turndown with irrational justifications. This present paper provides review on employees' reactions toward organizational changes. A special focus was made to highlight two types of reactions, which are: (1) passive and (2) active resistance. This paper also highlights prominent reasons why the employees resist and recommends steps to be taken to minimize negative effects while undertaking any organizational change process.

Key words: Organizational change, resistance, global competition, change process

INTRODUCTION

Many studies (e.g. Coch & French, 1948; Scott & Jaffe, 1998; Waldersee and Griffiths, 1997; Zander, 1950) have established that resistance to change is negative and should be removed or minimized. Coch and French's (1946) view on resistance to change is that it is a combination of an individual reaction to frustration with strong group-induced forces. Similarly, Zander (1950) has defined resistance to change as "a behavior which is intended to protect an individual from the effects of real or imaged change" (Zander, 1950: 9). In the same view, Agocs (1997) has defined resistance as a process of refusal by decision-makers to be influenced or affected by the views, concerns or evidence presented to them by those who propose change.

Organizations today face many challenges such as sharp economic swings, new competitive pressures, globalization of the market place, complete reshaping of the business world, new technologies, social culture shifts, regulatory changes and also the great competition between the organizations to achieve continuity, success and excellence. These challenges have created many requirements and necessities among which the administrative change that becomes one of the most important requirements of progress, development and innovation for any organization. It is not seen just as means used by some organization in consequent to a crisis occurs and when it cools down all the efforts that have been done changed to such a monotonous state.

Individuals go through a reaction process when they are personally confronted with major organizational change (Jacobs, 1995; Kyle, 1993). According to Scott and Jaffe (1988) this process consists of four phases: initial denial, resistance, gradual exploration, and eventual commitment. Unconscious processes arise as individuals respond to the threats of change (Halton, 1994; O'Connor, 1993). Individuals unconsciously use well-developed and habitual defense mechanisms to protect themselves from change and from the feelings of anxiety change causes (Oldham & Kleiner, 1990; de Board, 1978). These defenses can sometimes obstruct and hinder an individual from adapting to change (Halton, 1994). Resistance is a natural part of the change process and is to be expected (Coghlan, 1993; Steinburg, 1992; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). Resistance occurs because change involves going from the known to the unknown (Coghlan, 1993; Steinburg, 1992; Myers & Robbins, 1991; Nadler, 1981). Typically, individuals seek a comfortable level of arousal and stimulation and try to maintain that state (Nadler, 1981; Zaltman and Duncan, 1977). Individuals differ in terms of their ability and willingness to adapt to organizational change (Darling, 1993). This is because individuals experience change in different ways (Carnall, 1986). Some

people tend to move through the change process rather quickly, while others may become stuck or experience multiple transitions (Scott & Jaffe, 1988) that impede the change process.

The failure of many large-scale corporate change programs can be traced directly to employee resistance (Maurer, 1997; Spiker & Lesser, 1995; Regar *et al*., 1994; Martin, 1975). A longitudinal study conducted by Waldersee and Griffiths (1997) of 500 large Australian organizations during 1993 and 1996 revealed that employee resistance was the most frequently cited implementation problem encountered by management when introducing change. Over half the organizations surveyed experienced employee resistance. These findings raise questions about how effectively the resistance phase is managed when change is implemented.

In summary, resistance to change generally refers to the behaviors of individuals or groups of individuals who are opposed to or unsupportive of changes planned by top executives to be implemented in the organizations. The resistance towards change will hamper the initiatives taken to help the organizations undertake challenges as discussed before. Given the importance of managing the resistance towards change effectively, therefore, this paper aims to define employee reactions and to identify the most common causes of employee reaction. This paper also intends to discuss the symptoms and consequences of reaction towards change.

Background Information

The Industrial Organizations in Rabigh Industrial District are facing both external and internal forces that make change inevitable. External forces such as joint venture project, new work force demographics, changing expectations about quality, productivity, customer satisfaction, and new technologies are dramatically affecting the operating environment in organizations worldwide. Internally, financial constraints, the requirement to do more with less, cross-functional teams, mergers and acquisitions, and empowered workers all affect organization's abilities to compete in the global marketplace. No matter how these changes are defined, the challenges to organizations are inevitable. Thus, balancing the demands and expectations among the stakeholders including customers, employees, management, and shareholders are the requirement to avoid negative effects of change.

How an organization decides to motivate, communicate and integrate change into the work force will determine the magnitude of its success. The industrial organizations in Rabigh district such as, Rabigh Refinery, Power plant Desalination and the Cement Company, have faced difficult task implementing the necessary changes, which is staff resistance. Staff resistance may sometimes be based on logical and rational reasons, but most of the times are based on illogical and unjustified reasons; reasons that are not based on accepted rational bases. These resistance processes occur in different shapes and manners. Some resistance could simply be an attempt to delay the change execution which would increase the costs of those industrial organizations in addition to the great loss of efforts and time, and above all, constitute a great obstacle and hindrance on its way of progress and development.

Employee reactions

Why does for example, one employee see change as a threat and another see it as an opportunity? This can, among others, be explained by looking at the differences between groups of people. Group characteristics determine the reactions of its members towards change. Cultural background, nationality, composition, or social position of a group are examples of group characteristics that are suggested to influence employees resistance towards change (Metselaar & Cozijnsen, 1997). Furthermore, the hierarchical distance between top and middle management is also considered as an important factor that shapes different perceptions between the two groups regarding the change effort. Processes within a group, such as groupthink, can strengthen the opinion of the group, making it more difficult to alter individual opinions in the groups (Metselaar & Cozijnsen, 1997).

There are two forms of resistance,

1. Passive resistance refers then to restrained expressions of resistance, like not learning, passivity (Greenberg & Baron, 2002), ignoring or withdrawing the change (Bovey & Hede, 2001). Passive resistance exists when the change is not sufficiently prepared, supported or managed. Those faced with change, i.e. the 'change recipients', may be partially willing to cooperate with the change but feel that the effort needed to be adjusted may outweigh the possible benefits of the change (Dervitsiotis, 1998).

2. Active resistance contains reactions like dismantling or obstructing the change with deliberate sabotage or making intentional mistakes. Other examples of forms in which resistance occurs are strikes, protest letters to the management, and gossip about the change (Metselaar & Cozijnsen, 1997). Active resistance may be produced by those 'change recipients' who feel threatened by possible redistribution of political power. This may be avoided, however, by improved communication and participation to reduce fear. Alternatively, a more severe action can be taken for example through dismissal or layoffs (Dervitsiotis, 1998). Figure 1.1 gives the different forms of resistance to change.

Resistance to Change	
Passive Resistance	Active Resistance
Not learning	Deliberate sabotage
Indolence	Intentional mistakes
Ignoring	Strikes
Gossip	Protest letters
Withdrawing	Staying off the job
Refrain	Obstructing the process

Source: Adapted from Greenberg and Baron (2002) and Bovey and Hede (2001)
Figure 1.1: *Forms of resistance to change*

Similar to Dervitsiotis, Kaufman (1995) believes that a possible explanation of resistance towards change is the status of an employee within the organization. He states that "newcomers to organizations, no matter how carefully screened, bring with them values and perceptions at least a little divergent from those prevailing among members and leaders of long standing" (Kaufman, 1995). Kaufman describes numerous reasons why personnel may also have differing views and values to the organization. One of these reasons is that many organizations hire staff away from their competitors in order to gain workers with training and strategic information. In addition, many potential employees learn what the organization is looking for and appear to confirm to the organization standards even though they may not fully accept their values (Kaufman, 1995).

The generation in which the personnel originate from may also have a bearing on their values, perceptions and fears. For example, those who lived through times of economic depression or wars may tend to be more insecure and cautious, resulting in a fear of taking risks or changing (Kaufman, 1995). Kaufman states that because of personnel changes over time, organizations change despite the possible presence of resistance because staff turnover is something they cannot avoid and change sometimes happens without the organization realising (Kaufman, 1995). Another reason for changes within an organization is because people deliberately change them. Kaufman believes that self-interest is what motivates people to promote or resist change. Those who feel deprived in an organization are motivated to make changes in a bid to make their. When individuals demonstrate symptoms of resistance it is important to distinguish between the symptoms of resistance and the causes behind it.

As mentioned earlier, organizational change creates a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety for staff (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). The initial reaction of many people is to deny that the change will actually take

place, or that it is permanent and not simply a "passing phase." Managers need to develop solid communication plans that are embedded in the change process and that use a variety of media to reach different audiences with different communication needs and preferences. Some managers find that staff reacts positively to more interactive approaches, such as small focus groups, or one-on-one meetings with supervisors. Managers should also keep in mind those messages about change need to be repeated sometimes frequently because they seldom sink in with everyone the first time.

CAUSES OF EMPLOYEE REACTION

It can be argued that change is mostly managed from a technical perspective without considering some humanistic issues. For example, management usually invests a significant amount of money into creating the planned change however little is invested in communicating, training and providing follow-up needed to successfully implement the change (Schneider & Goldwasser, 1998). Staff may also find their requested input into procedures for implementing change are subsequently ignored by management, leaving staff disillusioned (Weinbach, 1984).

Hultman (1995) believes that most employees expect to have their views considered and to be treated with respect. However, some change initiators resort to questionable techniques to overcome resistance, such as manipulation and coercion (Hultman, 1995; Carr, 1994; New & Singer, 1983). These practices result in mistrust and resentment, making change more difficult to implement (New & Singer, 1983). Leading an organization through change involves constructively balancing human needs with those of the organizations' (Spiker & Lesser, 1995; Ackerman, 1986). This is because organizations consist ultimately of people, organizational change essentially involves personal change (Band, 1995; Steinburg, 1992; Dunphy & Dick, 1989). Change requires the participation of people who must first change themselves for organizational change to succeed (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007).

THE MOST COMMON SYMPTOMS/CONSEQUENCES OF REACTION

Consequences of resistance refer to the influence that the resistance has on the change process, the organization, and the people involved. In general, resistance has a delaying effect on a change process. Targets are not reached in time and because of this the result of the change process falls short of the actual plan. Also, the people involved can notice resistance on a deteriorated working atmosphere, and on reduced job satisfaction and motivation. When the behavior of the people involved can not directly be traced back to the organizational change, we speak about symptoms of resistance. Examples of symptoms of resistance are a rise of employees reporting ill, being late on meetings and a rise of the number of conflicts in the organization (Metselaar & Cozijnsen, 1997). When employees demonstrate symptoms of resistance is important to distinguish these symptoms of resistance from the causes behind it (Bovey & Hede, 2001). Forms of resistance are the expressions of discontent that, in contradiction to symptoms of resistance, can directly be traced back to the change process.

WAYS OF MANAGING EMPLOYEE'S REACTION

The change process must be managed in order to keep the organization moving toward its new vision and its stated objectives. We've all heard examples, elsewhere, of organizations that launched ambitious change initiatives founded on excellent ideas that were never fully implemented because they were not appropriately managed (Simoes, Dibb & Fisk, 2005). At best, an unmanaged change process accomplishes nothing, and the work that went into planning the change is wasted effort but at worst, an unmanaged change initiative can produce unintended, detrimental effects such as poor morale, loss of trust in management, workplace jealousy, and lower productivity. Thus, orchestrating the process of change is as important as selecting the content of change**.**

Moreover, managing employee resistance is a major challenge for the initiators of change, and according to O'Connor (1993) outweighs any other aspect of the change process. It could be argued that the vast majority of organizational change is managed from a technical viewpoint without recognizing or understanding how the human element influences the success or failure of the change (Arendt *et al*., 1995;

New & Singer, 1983). It is often easier for management to focus attention on, and to become preoccupied with, the technical side of change, dealing with quantifiable and predictable issues such as developing strategies and action plans, calculating profitability and rationalizing resources (Huston, 1992; Steier, 1989; Tessler, 1989). Management has a tendency to neglect and ignore the equally important human dimension when implementing change (Levine, 1997; Steier, 1989). By adopting a technical approach, individual resistance tends to be avoided. In essence, resistance becomes something to be resisted (Nord & Jermier, 1994) rather than managed. While it may be argued that change is mostly managed from a technical perspective without due consideration to human factors, there are times when the human side is accounted for in a token and instrumental way.

For example, while management invests a significant amount of money into creating the planned change, little is invested in communicating, training and follow-up needed to successfully implement the change (Schneider & Goldwasser, 1998). Staff may also find their requested input into procedures for implementing change are subsequently ignored by management, leaving staff disillusioned (Weinbach, 1984). Hultman (1995) believes that most employees expect to have their views considered and to be treated with respect. However, some change initiators instead resort to questionable techniques to overcome resistance, such as manipulation and coercion (Hultman, 1995; Carr, 1994; New & Singer, 1983). These practices result in mistrust and resentment, making change more difficult to implement (New & Singer, 1983). Leading an organization through change involves constructively balancing human needs with those of the organization (Spiker & Lesser, 1995; Ackerman, 1986). Because organizations consist ultimately of people, organizational change essentially involves personal change (Band, 1995; Steinburg, 1992; Dunphy & Dick, 1989). Change requires the participation of people who must first change themselves for organisational change to succeed (Evans, 1994).

CONCLUSION

People tend to blame the organization or top management for the changes occurring within the organization. Top management's actions are usually reactions to some outside force, such as stiffer competition, shifts in the marketplace or new technology. It is important to realize that change is a key towards surviving and growing in today's global economy.

The journey from the old way of doing things to the realization of the new vision and application of the new process is a long and impossible task without strong leadership and clear communication. Providing employees with the training and support as well as addressing their fears and insecurities during the change process are also key to keeping them committed to the task. Change agents need to stay mindful of the social and emotional impacts of the change process as well as the logistic and technical aspects for successful implementation and maintenance of a change program within their respective organizations.

Change must be planned, managed, implemented, controlled and monitored but for truly successful change there must be effective leadership. Leading successful change "requires vision, strategy, the development of a culture of sustainable shared values that support the vision and strategy for change, and empowering, motivating and inspiring those who are involved or affected" (Gill, 2003). Good management is a necessity for change management. Poor management of milestones, monitoring, planning or getting too caught up in the details of the process can prevent change from progressing. There is a distinction between management and leadership for change to be successful "…management produces orderly results which keep something working efficiently, whereas leadership creates useful change…" Leadership must take the organization "…on a journey from its current state to a desired future state…with all the problems that arise along the journey…" (Gill, 2003).

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